Aristotle for Teachers as Moral Educators

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When William Bennett was the conservative voice of education reform, everyone understood what was meant by "character development." What was implicit in *A Nation At Risk*, Bennett made explicit in *American Education: Making It Work*: "This same blending of character and ethics with knowledge and skills still has a place in American education today — or ought to." Bennett's support for the transmission of and indoctrination into "consensus ideals," combined with his refusal to "muddy those questions with unnecessary complexity," prevails as the conventional, and largely behaviorist, ideology for the K-12 teacher's role as moral educator.[1] What Barbara Duncan explained, in a recent issue of *Educational Theory*, as the "direct approach" to character education has emerged as the orthodox one. As Duncan remarked about advocates of this direct approach: "Their philosophy is that educators need not be afraid to encourage certain character traits in their students because there *are* certain qualities such as honesty, courage, and so forth, which are desirable for everyone no matter what their cultural background."[2]

Following Gilbert Ryle, "moral education'" is understood here in both its task and achievement senses, although the emphasis is on the task sense, the actual activities and processes that teachers learn and subsequently use in class.[3] With Bennett's conception, the task of character development begins with the transmission of the consensus ideals then converges on questions of absolute right and wrong, reinforcing student behavior as it "properly" manifests those ideals. The status-quo orientation inherent in such a conception seems designed to develop students committed to *what* they believe with little understanding of *why* they believe it. It is this conception and method that have led to teachers implementing the "character traits" approach in their classrooms under the pretense of moral education. This conception is deficient for two reasons.

First, it fails to recognize the distinction between task and achievement by assuming success in the former is sufficient for success in the latter. Second, factual agreement on consensus ideals is without much practical consequence. Even though we all might agree on the virtues of honesty and justice, and even agree that we want students to be honest and just, the essential problem is the *practical application* of such virtues in actual day-to-day experience. In other words, this is the "muddying complexity" Bennett's conception seeks to avoid. Or, as Emily Robertson has put it: "Human judgment is not without reason and in the giving and receiving of reasons we attempt to resolve moral disputes, although, of course, we can't be guaranteed in advance that we will be successful in doing so."[4] In recognizing the fact of moral disputes, she requires discussion of more general problems with respect to moral behavior.

Without any intent to prescribe an elaborate program of K-12 moral education that would prescribe equally detailed content for teacher education, this essay addresses the required conceptual understanding from the heuristic perspective of

Aristotelian ethics. Aristotle's thought provides conceptual understanding of the deficiencies above by identifying elements necessary in formulations of character education as well as in education programs which prepare teachers to implement character education in their classrooms. Thus, a few questions come to mind: First, with respect to moral education in the classroom, how are we to understand success? Second, what obstacles to success exist, especially in the achievement sense? Third, what task approaches and activities might be useful in overcoming those obstacles and in preparing students for the eventuality of moral disputes?[5]

INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS

Speaking of both K-12 schooling and the preparation of teachers, while "moral education" and "education in general" differ in some respects, they are more similar than dissimilar. Both can be explained in task and achievement terms; both have the same components — knowledge, skill, and disposition; significantly, both have the same reference center — education. Thus, one assumption must be that moral education is concerned with the same kinds of goals and activities as is education in general, though some content may differ. The state of being educated, according to John Chambers, entails rationality and cognitive perspective where the emphasis is not merely on knowledge acquired but also on the broadening effect of certain experiences.[6] Any kind of education is general, not merely specific; it gives one broad comprehension and understanding.

A second assumption is that, as a result, moral education, especially in the achievement sense, suffers the same malaise as education in general —the bureaucratic demand for an immediate, quantifiable measure of success. Teachers and schools, says Robertson, typically ignore that "any changed understanding has to prove itself in experience," that is, over time.[7]

The third assumption is that moral education must be understood in both task and achievement senses. Most any teacher can testify to the fact that he or she did a good job in the task of teaching — explaining, giving good reasons, providing examples — yet failed in the achievement sense. Teachers must be taught to focus on activities in the task sense of moral education that increase the probability of achievement; they also must be taught to recognize obstacles to achievement.

MORAL REASONING AND DESIRE

Two of the more recent proponents of the typical direct approach to character development have been Edward Wynne and Kevin Ryan. Wynne and Ryan not only argue for increased intervention by the schools in the area of character development, they advocate the imposition of a model of "good character" that emphasizes the standard "character traits" approach.[8] That Wynne and Ryan justify their position by appealing to Aristotelian moral philosophy, then, is added incentive for comparing Aristotle's views with those of this externally imposed, "direct approach."

In the general account of moral virtue given in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that the aim of moral teaching is to acquire *practical* knowledge; to become good in action, since "moral virtue comes about as a result of habit." Ultimately, "we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good."[9] Since only reasoning with a view to some desired end motivates us

to act, practical reasoning is distinguished from theoretical reasoning. Practical knowledge differs from theoretical knowledge because the former involves desire; or, as Aristotle puts it, "truth in agreement with right desire."[10] Before we can understand how reasoning motivates us to act, we must first understand how we are moved to act by desire. This is also necessary for our understanding of moral weakness.

Elsewhere, Aristotle tell us that every desire is relative to an end.[11] The essential relationship between desire and action makes it possible to explain a person's actions by citing her desires. While every desire is relative to an end, this end is something that we imagine or think to be pleasant or painful, good or bad. With human beings, as reasoning animals with extensive discriminatory powers, the relationship between desiring an object and thinking it to be good in some way is complex. Aristotle recognizes three discriminatory powers: sensation, imagination, and reason. While all animals are capable of imagination of a sort, what he calls calculative imagination "is possible only in beings with a sense of time."[12] Cows and dogs are unable to remember past or anticipate future experiences and are thus limited to desires of objects which they currently perceive. Human beings are not restricted so.

The point is that our actions can be guided not only by present feelings of pleasure and pain; they can be guided as well by calculation and anticipation of future effects. Our human ability to calculate or deliberate presupposes both foresight and the ability to compare presently perceived good (bad) effects of an action against anticipated future bad (good) effects. It is calculation or deliberation of this sort that is fundamental both to virtue and to moral education.

Aristotle recognizes three types of desire: wish, appetite, and passion.[13] Both appetite and passion are non-rational desire; wish is, by definition, always a rational desire. The distinction most relevant to moral education is between rational and non-rational desire, a distinction which corresponds to the types of imagination possessed by reasoning and non-reasoning animals. Only humans beings can calculate or deliberate; only we can have rational desire.

Now, children (and other morally weak people) are governed by their appetites and passions whose objects of desire are taken to be the apparent good — what they think (mistakenly) is good for them. The problem with children is not that they do not act, but that they do not act with a precise understanding of what is truly good for them. This mistaken conception of the truly good is a mistake in theoretical (not practical) reasoning, is the result of ignorance, and is the first problematic area for moral education and moral educators. It is at this point only that Bennett's consensus ideals or imposed character traits have any meaningful use, and only if they are accepted as general expressions of what is truly good for individuals.

DELIBERATION AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

With the first problematic area being mistakes in theoretical reasoning, attention turns to practical reasoning. Here Aristotle make two points about deliberation: We deliberate about things that are in our power to do, and, unlike with theoretical reasoning, we now deliberate about means, not ends.[14] The starting point of practical

reasoning is some assumed end — the conclusion of some prior theoretical reasoning. For example, if the end is good health, one must first have some appropriate conception of what good health is and must also have a desire to produce it. Our desire for the end then stimulates thinking about the means that we have to achieve it. Thus, moral deliberation is a process of thinking which consists in making judgments about the means in our power to some desired end.

Another important factor in moral deliberation is choice, not to be confused with any type of desire. Only humans (reasoning animals) have choice; but we also know that we can wish for whatever we want, but we can choose only what is in our power to attain. Rather, says Aristotle, *good* choice is the result of true reasoning and right desire.[15] So practical reasoning provides reasons for desiring and choosing something. The practical knowledge which results differs from the kind of knowledge that results from theoretical reasoning. Consequently, we have the necessary elements to be taught and learned: Theoretical reasoning results in conviction, and practical reasoning results in decision and action.

The pertinent relationship is that between practical reasoning and action, where the result of practical reasoning is practical knowledge — knowledge of what one should do. In our deliberation we employ general practical principles which state what one should do to reach the desired end, but we also must recognize that certain actions within our power are instances of the general principles. In other words, for authentic programs in moral education, the student must come to possess knowledge both of certain general principles and of particular facts, and must be able to apply knowledge of general principles to particular actions. Once the student recognizes that a particular action that she can perform is an instance of a kind of action which she has judged should be done, then she will have both a good reason and a motive for acting.

Herein lie the second and third problematic areas for moral educators — both of which are problems with practical reasoning. First, following Aristotle, if we grant that the goal of moral education is having students do the right thing, then the failure of the student to recognize a particular action within his power as an instance of the general principle will result in no appropriate action. This is a deficiency in knowledge and is addressed in the following section on moral education.

The second problem is a consequence of the relationship between practical reasoning and action. It came as no surprise to many of my elementary and secondary school teachers that I, with a stunning degree of frequency, did not do what I knew I should. We can impose on students general moral principles, or the consensus ideals and character traits, and they can even recognize a particular action within their power as an instance of the general principles. Yet, they may still fail to act. Failure to act is a failure of disposition and is the pivotal, though typically ignored, dilemma for teachers as moral educators.

Moral Struggle and Weakness

Thus far, Aristotle has argued for us that once a student recognizes that a particular action that she can perform is an instance of a kind of action which she has judged should be done, then she will have both a good reason and a motive for

performing the particular action. It is important here that teachers as moral educators note the importance of a) the act of judging, and b) having a good reason for acting. These are essential elements in moral teaching and learning. But, Aristotle also reminds the moral educator that any good reason in and of itself is not sufficient for the student to actually act. She may, at the same time, have a conflicting good or even better reason for not acting. That is, she may, without being inconsistent or irrational, decide not to act.

Very often, contrary to Bennett's avoidance of that "muddying complexity," practical reasoning consists in weighing conflicting alternatives. Aristotle recognized this in saying that sometimes our deliberation requires that we consider by which of several means our end "is most easily and best produced."[16] Moral struggle and moral weakness, then, constitute difficult obstacles for genuine moral education. Both can terminate in failure to act accordingly, or appropriately. The morally weak person "is like a city which passes all the right decrees and has good laws, but makes no use of them.…but the wicked man is like a city that uses its laws, but has wicked laws to use."[17]

The morally weak student does not possess mistaken purpose; neither is he ignorant of the general moral principles. He simply does not act after having judged and chosen. While the problem with the "wicked man," like the city with wicked laws, is one of theoretical reasoning, the problem of the morally weak student is one not of reasoning, but of disposition. It is indeed a problem for Aristotelian ethics to explain in what way or how a person does not do what he knows he should. In a heuristic sense, of course, we know that it would take an enormous leap of faith to conclude from the fact of human rationality that humans always act, and that they always act rationally. This, then, is the background against which the moral educator's problem of moral weakness must be set.

Here, again, Aristotle provides information useful to the educator. He explains the reality of moral weakness by distinguishing kinds of knowledge. The distinction is between having knowledge and exercising knowledge; between possessing a capacity and the actual use of that capacity. Practical knowledge, the result of practical reasoning, is a capacity to act; exercising knowledge is a disposition. The moral educator thus recognizes three types of knowledge necessary in moral teaching: knowledge of the general moral principle, knowledge of the particular action within one's power as an instance of the general moral principle, and dispositional knowledge. Three kinds of knowledge required for success in the achievement sense of moral teaching; three kinds of error possible in both moral teaching and learning; three problematic areas for moral education. And, moral struggle is the central thread.

MORAL EDUCATION — TEACHER EDUCATION

In summary, the main features of Aristotle's account can be characterized as three problematic areas in moral education:

1. Failure to recognize what is good for oneself, as well as for all; that is, failure to recognize the general moral principles which are to be used in the process of deliberation.

2. Recognition of the general moral principles to be used in the process of deliberation, but a failure to recognize the particular action within one's power as an instance of the general moral principles. One type of moral weakness.

3. Recognition of the general moral principles, and recognition of the particular action within one's power as an instance of the general moral principles, but a failure to act accordingly. Another type of moral weakness.

In Aristotle's terms, the first area is a problem in theoretical reasoning. The starting point of practical reasoning is some assumed end, the end-point of some prior theoretical reasoning. This is the area in which the "consensus ideals" and "character traits" belong. At this level, while we tend to accept uncritically such principles as honesty, loyalty, justice, truthfulness, there are some who fail to internalize such principles. Moral educators must also confront the fact that general moral principles, as a collective characterization of the "good," in and of themselves do nothing to settle substantive moral conflict and do not automatically produce "right" behavior. Yet, typically, this is the space which most "character training" programs occupy. (It also seems to me that, unlike for philosophers of education, for real K-12 classroom teachers the origin of the "good" is of much less importance relative to their day-to-day interest in "right" behavior.)

Teaching teachers to mitigate the failure to internalize general moral principles will be a difficult task within classroom environments which are characterized by economic and competitive individualism. Frequently, what is "good for oneself" and what is "good for all" are inseparable. To ignore this is to teach that the end justifies the means; that it does not matter what effect my action has on others, or for that matter on myself *in the long run*. This is a failure in the task of moral education, and in preparing moral educators, in two respects. First, the individual competitiveness of the classroom environment does little to foster benevolence or the necessary conception of social community. Second, the student has not learned how to weigh future effects against present effects. The first is changed, argued John Dewey, only by modifying our conception of the individual and the school.[18] This would then enhance the probability of eliminating the second failure in that students' weighing of future against present effects would be occurring within a much more favorable social and moral environment. This compels us to recognize that moral education, as well as the preparation of teachers as moral educators, does not occur in a vacuum. The topic of moral education cannot be meaningfully discussed without *at the same time* addressing authentic education and education reform at all levels. Writing in the section "Intelligence and Character" in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey observed that

> (M)oral education in school is practically hopeless when we set up the development of character as a supreme end, and at the same time treat the acquiring of knowledge and the development of understanding, which of necessity occupy the chief part of school time, as having nothing to do with character. On such a basis, moral education is inevitably reduced to some kind of catechetical instruction, or lessons about morals. Lessons "about morals" signify as matter of course lessons in what other people think about virtues and duties.[19]

Realistically speaking, however, the tasks of moral education will occur in the present classroom environment. While a different social and moral classroom

context would facilitate successful achievement of those tasks, the values of that context such as justice, community, benevolence, and so forth should be the ones taught and justified in presenting students with multiple opportunities for practicing the weighing of future and present effects in diverse circumstances. Such opportunities provide practice in theoretical reasoning about general moral principles, and at the same time would provide a valuable source of increased knowledge pertinent to sound moral decisions.[20] Such opportunities also would facilitate elimination of the second problematic area in moral education —failure to recognize the particular action within one's power as an instance of the general moral principle.

We could rightfully expect that the first and second problematic areas in moral education would be mitigated if both teacher educators and teachers as moral educators exemplified the conception of education employed at the beginning of this essay. Paying more than mere lip service to rationality, comprehensive understanding, and cognitive perspective in real classrooms would facilitate not only practice in the processes of reasoning but also development of the cognitive maturity necessary for managing, if not resolving, moral disputes.

The third problematic area — the failure to act — is not easily controlled and thus is the most difficult. This is a failure of individual disposition in that the person knows what should be done, but either does something else or nothing at all. Consequently, moral education, and by implication teacher education, must attend to the task of instilling in students the disposition to act accordingly, appropriate to the particular set of circumstances. This confronts not only the failure to act but, again, the reality of moral struggle.

Unfortunately, Aristotle is less helpful here. For this problem is one of motivation — the exercising of knowledge. The knowledge and abilities which mitigate the first two problematic areas will never be enough to ensure success in the achievement sense of moral teaching because human beings are free agents. As free agents, students are always capable of accepting or rejecting what is taught; hence, there will always remain the very real possibility that a moral decision will not be acted upon. Conventional moral educators do not like that fact, but it is a fact nonetheless. However, the possibility of success here in the achievement sense can be enhanced by certain approaches and characteristics. Teaching, learning, and practicing the skill of moral judgment all occur through example. In the weighing of conflicting desires, and in the justifying of decisions that are moral, students most readily learn to make judgments and adopt the disposition to do so when they see that their teacher does so as a matter of course.

One good method for developing these characteristics and dispositions continues to be the use of case studies which present moral dilemmas. Such case studies can and should be constructed by the perceptive teacher at any level of schooling, and they can be pertinent to any subject. Further, these case studies should not entail only extreme situations. Students tend to view these as unrealistic and outside of their own experience. Also, the moral disputes we face on a day-to-day basis are more often less extreme decisions of self-interest versus doing the right thing. The effective teacher will choose cases for their intrinsic appeal to and appropriateness

for the particular group, and draw from a variety of sources, especially from students' own real experience and relationships.

In being exposed to meaningful cognitive conflict with others, and as appropriate for their age and maturity, students would be "forced" to struggle with the essence of moral behavior. Though students must be taught, of course, to accept rules, learning must also involve an understanding of the complexity of the decision-making process and a realization that behavior rests as much on judgment, sensitivity, and analysis as on sound moral principles. Development of a disposition to act would be promoted as an integral component of daily life. As Dewey noted, "(T)he moral and the social quality of conduct are, in the last analysis, identical with each other."[21] The use of moral dilemmas and the reality of moral struggle in a social context expose the absurdity of trying to avoid "the muddying complexity" of real human existence, reveal the severe limitations of the typical "trait" approach to character education, and identify serious flaws in many teacher education programs.

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1. William Bennett, A*merican Education: Making it Work* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1988), 36-37.

2. Barbara Duncan, "Character Education: Reclaiming the Social," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 121.

3. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Penguin, 1966), 143-47. See also the distinction between the logical and strategic acts of teaching in Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 1-9.

4. Emily Robertson, "Moral Judgment," in *Philosophy of Education 1990*, ed. David Ericson (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1991), 381.

5. What this brief essay is *not* is an exhaustive analysis of Aristotelian moral philosophy. Neither is it a comprehensive examination of all distinct points of view on character education in contemporary schooling.

6. John Chambers, *The Achievement of Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 19.

7. Robertson, "Moral Judgment," 380.

8. Edward Wynne and Kevin Ryan, *Reclaiming Our Schools: A Handbook on Teaching Character, Academics, and Discipline* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 141-53.

9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a15-20; 1103b24-30.

10. Ibid., 1139a30.

11. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 433a16.

12. Ibid., 431a5-20; 431b5-10; 433b5-10.

13. Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium*, 700b20-25.

14. Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1112a30, b13.

15. Ibid., 1139a25.

16. Ibid., 1112b5-20.

17. Ibid., 1152a20-25.

18. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1963) and John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (New York: Capricorn, 1962).

19. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 411.

20. Roger Straughan, *Can We Teach Children To Be Good?* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982), 80-105.

21. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 415.